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ABSTRACT

This paper constructs a framework for understanding research partnerships with youth and uses this framework to examine a project in which university researchers collaborated with youth to examine their educational institutions and the contexts of their learning. Adult researchers trained and supervised 21 "youth ethnographers" to carry out research among their peers in schools, youth centers, and neighborhoods. As part of a 2-year study of a multi-site youth development initiative in an urban area, the youth ethnographers gathered evidence through interviews, observations, and informal discussions, and reported their findings and analyzed their data about the experiences of youth and the role of neighborhood, school, and peer contexts. The project provided evidence of a variety of benefits of the approach. There were tangible benefits to the youth ethnographers themselves. They learned research skills, earned a stipend, and met new people. The project also had a positive impact on researchers' relations with youth center adult staff. The approach also helped the study gather data to which it would not otherwise have had access. There were also challenges that give cause for reflection, such as the tension between making the project a developmental experience of youth and making it a data collection effort for researchers, or the question of motivating the young participants. Some strategies are suggested to deal with these and associated issues in conducting inquiries with young research assistants. (Contains 43 references.) (SLD)

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Youth-Adult Research Collaborations: Bringing Youth Voice and Development to the Research Process

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Introduction

Research on urban youth and the important institutions in their lives has profited from methods that are sensitive to contexts and the meanings that youth apply to them (Burton, Obeidallah & Allison, 1996; Heath, 1996). Ethnographic and other qualitative methods have enabled researchers to question mainstream assumptions about normative development and to develop rich new understandings of the multiple learning environments of urban youth (Brown & Theobald, 1998; McLaughlin, 1993). Recent years have also seen dramatic changes in the ways in which researchers work with members of the community to understand and improve practice in schools and youth organizations. Yet it is still uncommon for researchers to collaborate in the research process with youth themselves to gain a more context-sensitive understanding of their lives (Muncey & McQuillan, 1991; Olsen, Jaramillo, McCall-Perez, & White, 1999). Youth are well situated to challenge our assumptions about what matters in schools and youth organizations and to contribute their own ideas about what are relevant outcomes. A promising avenue for research on the contexts of urban youth lies in more extensive collaborations with youth, in which they are trained to design questions and gather evidence to address a research question or pressing problem.

In this paper, we construct a framework for understanding research partnerships with youth, and use this framework to examine a project in which university researchers (ourselves included) collaborated with youth to examine their educational institutions and the context of their learning. Adult researchers trained and supervised twenty-one "youth ethnographers" to carry out research among their peers in schools, youth centers, and neighborhoods. As part of a two-year study of a multi-site youth development initiative, the youth gathered evidence through interviews, observations, and informal discussions and regularly reported their findings and analyzed their data about the experiences of youth and the important role of neighborhood, school, and peer contexts in their lives. This case builds on participatory research methods to extend recent interest in ethnographic and qualitative methods in the study of urban youth, shedding light on the ways that youth perspectives can improve research on their lives and the central places that affect them.

Youth-Adult Research Partnerships: An Undertheorized Practice

A useful starting point for understanding research partnerships with youth is to examine common approaches to conducting research in collaboration with communities and practitioners.

Three approaches dominate the literature – participatory action research (often just "action research"), empowerment evaluation, and inquiry-based reform. Robert Rapoport (1985) defines the aim of action research as "contribut[ing] both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable framework" (p. 9). In arriving at this definition, he outlines some of the barriers that have historically existed between what he labels "scientists" and "technologists" – what we refer to as researchers and practitioners. Much of the work of researchers has been "oriented to their specialist colleagues" and published in academic journals, leading it to be regarded as irrelevant or inaccessible to local settings. The work of practitioners, on the other hand, is often seen as atheoretical or overly local, conducted with "little explicit interest in developing science" (p. 5). This rift has been "clearly institutionalized" in training and in the goals and products of both researchers and practitioners. Hart (1992) points out that to overcome this researcher-practitioner dichotomy, it is necessary to "re-professionalize" research, creating new roles for researchers as democratic participants in a partnership with local people.

As Rapoport (1985) discusses, there have been periods of closeness and of distance between social scientists and social action agencies, with recent years witnessing a renewed emphasis on the importance of developing collaborative "action-research" relationships. This push has been especially strong in education, with a move towards looking at process as well as outcomes. Maughan and Rutter (1985) state, "only in this way can we gain useful understandings of how to improve educational provision that…can enrich our understanding of theoretical concerns" (p. 27). In this way, "action-research" has increasingly become a legitimate means of investigating and understanding programs designed to reach children and youth.

Empowerment evaluation also aims to link researchers with local people, in this case program participants. Empowerment evaluation, as described by Fetterman (1996), is designed to "help people help themselves and improve their programs using a form of self-evaluation and reflection" (p. 5). In this research relationship, researchers and program participants are on more equal footing. The idea behind this type of evaluation came from Fetterman's explorations of how social scientists could "give voice to" the people they work with, bringing their concerns and interests to inform policymakers. In addition to highlighting local voice and expertise, empowerment evaluation allows researchers to understand a situation "by degrees rather than as an absolute" (p. 379). Again, as in action-research, *process* is seen as critical. In recent years,

empowerment evaluation, in which program participants act as evaluators and researchers become coaches, has become widespread and has been institutionalized within the American Evaluation Association. It has weathered critiques that it is not rigorous or objective, to become a common approach to evaluation used in higher education, urban public education, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and foundations (Fetterman, 1996).

A third collaborative strategy, "inquiry-based reform," has developed as a way to conduct research that is specifically focused on school reform from within schools themselves. According to researchers and scholars (for example, Fullan, 1993; Tyack and Cuban, 1995), this type of research assumes that the best knowledge of school context and how to improve school practice rests within schools, rather than with outside researchers or organizations. As in participatory action research, inquiry-based reform allows school personnel to create their own research questions and take action based on their research processes. As described by Mitra (2001),

> People within schools examine their everyday realities to identify what needs to be fixed and how. They collect data from their schools and develop a vision of how they would like to change their schools and take steps to attempt to do so... While this process can happen at the classroom, grade or departmental level, or school wide, the intention is for this process to become all-encompassing so that all decisions are driven by the vision developed. (p. 2)

Thus, as the inquiry process becomes institutionalized within schools, school staff and teachers become the researchers as well as the implementers of policies and practices stemming from that research.

All three of these approaches, participatory action research, empowerment evaluation, and inquiry-based reform, are techniques designed to ease the tensions between researchers and practitioners and to improve understandings of local context and processes. They recognize the importance of local knowledge and expertise in formulating and answering research questions. However, these research methods have focused primarily on working with *adult* practitioners, program participants, and school personnel.[1] This ignores the important role young people can play in the research process. Indeed, Hart describes research as a domain "in which children's competence and ability to participate is undervalued" (1992, p. 17). As Mitra (2001) states, "the perspective of whose opinion matters in schools is far too narrow." We extend this to include the

[1] Some exceptions will be discussed later in this paper.

perspectives of youth in out-of-school youth programs and organizations as well. Despite the fact that research efforts are often explicitly designed to create more engaging and enriching environments for youth, young people's perspectives are rarely included in the research process. Thus, while great advances have been made in theorizing researcher-practitioner partnerships, research collaborations with youth remain undertheorized and underutilized.

The exclusion of youth voice in the research process can be understood within a larger context of the social construction of young people. Much of the research literature often presents youth as "pathologized, criminalized, muted, or silenced altogether" (Griffin, 1993, quoted in Mitra, 2001). These constructions do not provide the basis for developing positive, engaging, or empowering research partnerships with youth. As described by Nathan and Kielsmeier (1991), "adults today tend to treat [youth] as objects, as problems, or as the recipients (not the deliverers) of services" (p. 740). Youth are seen, then, as the "targets" or the "clients" of programming, not as producers of knowledge around what makes for the most effective opportunities for young people. Others point out that while there has been an increase in the discussion of youth issues, there has been little space for actual youth voice and action (Fassler, 1998; and others). Urban youth and young people of color, especially, are often marginalized, increasingly denied opportunity and agency to take active roles in their communities (Hart, et.al., 1997; Creating Citizenship Conference Consensus Paper, 1999). Policies and practices exacerbate this, as they present these youth with disconnected institutional environments (McLaughlin, 2000). Youth are constructed as problems to be fixed or powerless dependents to be taken care of. They are not often presented as powerful resources to be actively engaged in research to improve organizations or their communities.

Yet despite the negative construction of youth, there has been a call on the part of both practitioners and researchers to engage youth in participatory partnerships. Roger Hart (e.g. 1992; Hart, et.al., 1997; Hart and Schwab, 1997) has been a strong advocate for young people's participation in organizations and in research. In his "ladder of young people's participation" (1992), he offers a typology of youth participation that ranges from tokenism and manipulation, which he labels "non-participation," through to projects that are "young person-initiated," but which have shared decision-making with adults. Further, he discusses the ways in which young people's motivations and competencies are most strongly developed through opportunities for true participation and partnership with adults.

Hart's emphasis on the importance of youth participation and youth-adult partnership has been echoed by others (for example, Boyte & Skelton, 1997; Fassler, 1998; International Youth Foundation, 1996; Kothari, 1997; Longo & O'Donoghue, 1999; Meucci & Schwab, 1997; Pittman, Ferber & Irby, 2000). In a recent article, Camino (2000) summed up the rationale for working to create youth-adult partnerships in community work, arguing that the benefits of such partnerships accrue to youth, adults, and communities. Creating these partnerships means changing principles and values so that youth are seen as partners rather than "beneficiaries" of programs, developing communicative and cooperative skills and competencies in both youth and adults, and establishing an action plan that allows for balance in youth and adult voice and role. Camino concludes her discussion by pointing to the need for researchers to "don different lenses" in their work; researchers must be willing to broaden their frames to include ethnographic and action research strategies and to challenge established views of young people. While Camino's discussion focuses on youth-adult partnerships in general, her logic can be extended to apply to youth-adult *research* partnerships. In this sense, her discussion provides an understanding of the rationale for and the challenges of forming collaborative research relationships with young people.

Although examples of youth-adult research partnerships are rare, it is helpful to take a closer look at some projects that have specifically engaged youth as researchers (Fielding, 2001; Meucci and Schwab, 1997; Schwab, 1997; McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman, 1994). Meucci and Schwab (1997) present an overview of their work involving children in participatory action research around environmental planning and change efforts. These authors describe how they came to see the importance of grounding their project, which was focused on improving the environments of California children, in young people's own representations and understandings of their realities. In their research process, they worked with young people to both define problems and develop solutions.

Similarly, McLaughlin, Irby and Langman (1994) used local young people as "junior ethnographers" in their study of youth involvement in neighborhood organizations. In this project youth interviewed other youth to gather their views of their communities, neighborhood organizations, and futures, as well as talking to adults about their perceptions of their neighborhoods and of young people. McLaughlin, Irby and Langman found that these youth researchers were "key" to their study, allowing "access to youth perspectives, to activities, and to

neighborhood respondents that otherwise would have been closed" (p. xv). Both of these projects point to the importance of engaging youth as researchers to understand youth's contexts. However, they do not provide a framework for understanding what the research partnership looks like. That is, what do we need to consider when putting these partnerships into action?

In a more recent discussion of youth researchers, Fielding (2001) uses the lessons learned from the "Students as Researchers" project in England to develop a framework for conceptualizing student involvement in school improvement efforts. In this project, a group of students were trained in research and data collection techniques. With adult staff members in supporting and facilitating roles, the students identified issues important to the school, gathered and analyzed data, and made recommendations for change. Fielding presents this project as unique in that it emphasizes student voice, power, and perspective. His framework for understanding levels of student involvement reflects the range of ways in which students can be engaged, ranging from data sources to researchers. For each of these levels of involvement, he discusses the relationship between teachers and students and how knowledge is used and meaning made. This framework serves as an important starting point in understanding how youth and adult staff can work together to improve schools. In focusing on the school setting, however, Fielding does not offer a more global framework for understanding youth-adult research partnerships that span neighborhoods and other contexts in youth's lives. Also, the relationship between an adult, university-based researcher and a young person in a local community may be quite different from that between teachers and students in a school.

The current state of our understanding of youth as researchers remains insufficient and undertheorized. New modes of research, such as participatory action research, empowerment evaluation, and inquiry-based reform, offer the basis for understanding some of the tensions and benefits of attempts to broaden our research frame and break down the barriers between researchers and practitioners or communities. Ethnographic and other qualitative methods have expanded our recognition of the importance of context in understanding the lives of youth. However, few researchers have explored the relationship between these. That is, few projects have looked at how we can build on the traditions of participatory research by involving young people themselves to learn more about youth and the institutions that shape their lives.

The purpose of this paper, then, is twofold. We will first address the theoretical gap by constructing a framework through which to understand youth-adult research partnerships. We

will then present a specific project, the Youth Ethnographers Project (YEP), which involved young people as one component of a larger research study examining a multi-site, youth development initiative. In doing so, we seek to answer two questions:

1) How do youth-adult research partnerships expand our conceptual understanding of methods for researching the experiences and contexts of youth?

2) What can we learn from the Youth Ethnographers Project (YEP) about the benefits and challenges of partnering with youth to conduct research?

Framework for Understanding Research Partnerships with Youth

Research with youth takes on varied forms across multiple dimensions. In the following section we build a framework through which we will analyze our own work with the Youth Ethnographers Project, and which we hope will illuminate more generally the benefits and challenges of working in partnership with youth researchers. Drawing from literature on research methodology and youth development, we develop a typology of "strategies" for conducting research with youth (see Figure 1). This typology begins with research strategies that involve youth as "subjects" and "informants." These methods represent the most frequent forms of research with youth, and they play important roles in understanding youth development programming and context, as discussed by Husbands and Sears (2001) and others.

Our focus here will be on the difference between strategies in which youth's role in the research *process* is rather passive and more participatory research strategies, such as those that involve young people as "research assistants" or as "research partners." We feel that the distinction between youth as research assistants and as research partners is an important one; it holds the potential for greater understanding of the different types of collaborative research relationships adults can form with youth. While we certainly would not argue that such collaborative research should replace conventional methods of research about youth, we hope to highlight the promise of this mostly uncharted terrain. In the sections that follow, we outline the dimensions that give shape to these four basic research strategies.

Figure 1. Framework for Understanding Research with Youth

	Youth as Subjects	Youth as Informants	Youth as Research Assistants	Youth as Research Partners
Youth-Adult Relationship	Little Interaction	Some Interaction	Quasi Partners	Full Partners
Youth Development	Not Applicable		Basic Skills	Youth Development
Expertise/ Knowledge	Adult researchers are experts, decide what is important, create knowledge		Adults experts on questions; youth not necessarily knowledge creators	Youth experts on questions; local knowledge valued; youth generate knowledge
Ownership	Situated primarily in research institutions		Attempts to share	Fully shared
Audience	Academic, Policymaking, Research Communities		Mixed	Primarily Local; May Extend to Others
Ecological Validity	Not Applicable		High	High

Youth-Adult Relationship

One of the first dimensions that should be considered when conducting research with youth is the nature of the youth-adult relationship (See Figure 1). That is, what will the youth's role be and what will their interaction look like? As Hart (1992) points out, most social science research with young people is "still of the 'distant' adult-controlled type" (p. 18). This, more traditional type of research falls under the "youth as subjects" or the "youth as informants" categories. In both of these cases, adults control the research relationship and the youth-adult interaction, which may vary from low interaction between an adult researcher and a passive

youth respondent (e.g. filling in a survey) to somewhat higher interaction (e.g. in an adult-led focus group or interview).

The "youth as research assistants" and "youth as research partners" strategies require, as Mitra (2001) describes it, a "mental changing of frames" about the role of youth (and of adults) in the research process. Similarly, Camino (2000), as discussed above, talks of the need to redefine and reshape prevailing notions of youth and adult roles so that youth-adult interactions become more equal and more focused on shared decision-making and shared work. This shift is further elaborated upon in the participatory action research and empowerment evaluation literature, both of which call for increased collaboration and democratic partnership (for example, Fetterman, 1996; Hart, 1992; Rapoport, 1985). Hart (1992) maintains that the need for this type of collaborative partnership is critical to decreasing the alienation of local people from the research and program planning process; rather than assuming that the data collected by adult researchers can speak *for* youth, he advocates involving youth as active participants in the research process.

We have framed our understanding of youth-adult partnerships as including both "quasi" and "full" partnership arrangements. In quasi-partnerships, youth are involved as research assistants, collecting and analyzing data in response to direction by adult researchers. Generally, youth in this arrangement do not lead the development of lines of inquiry. In "full" research partnerships, youth and adults work together to generate research questions and to collect and analyze data. These two levels reflect different partnership configurations that can arise as adults and youth negotiate their relationship and attempt to "subvert prevailing notions of youth and adult roles" (Camino, 2000).

Youth Development

Among the themes that dominate the participatory action research and empowerment evaluation literatures is the idea of building the strength and capacity of local participants (Fetterman, 1996; Hart, 1992; Fawcett, et.al., 1996; Linney & Wandersman, 1996; Mayer, 1996; Rapoport, 1985). In translating this to research with youth, we have chosen to use the concept of youth development. Fielding (2001), Camino (2000) and Hart (1992) all touch on the centrality of learning and development to any participatory project with youth. We divide this learning into two general types – basic skill development and more holistic youth development. Basic

skill development refers to basic research skills such as interviewing, conducting observations, writing up field notes and reflections, and analyzing data.

The second level of youth development involves more "transformative" learning. Mitra (2001) describes research partnerships with youth as providing "two of the most basic developmental needs of early adolescence – meaningful participation and positive interactions with adults and peers." Further, opportunities for empowerment, which allow youth to take on new roles and responsibilities, are an important component of youth development (Pittman and Wright, 1991). Hart (1992) describes the kind of empowering developmental learning that can occur when youth are involved in research partnerships, learning that allows young people to understand problems and "barriers to change" and develop the strategies to overcome them (p. 19). Finally, Camino (2000) points to the importance of developing skills of communication, teamwork, and cooperative action. In contrast to basic skill development, more holistic youth development is more attentive to development across various domains of functioning that are not necessarily tied to a particular skill, but are related to more general themes of agency and persistence as well as communication and cooperation. However, while we have made a conceptual distinction between basic skill development and youth development, it is important to recognize that the boundaries between them are not rigid and that more holistic youth development is often an expansion of basic skills.

In the "youth as subjects" and "youth as informants" research strategies (see Figure 1), youth development is not an intentional aspect of the research process, and it is therefore not appropriate to analyze these research approaches based on their contribution to youth development.[2] When working in collaboration with youth, as in the "youth as research assistants" and "youth as research partners" categories, youth development is often an explicit focus of the research process. When youth are seen as research assistants, the focus of their training and work is often on data collection and perhaps analysis. This level of involvement may provide youth with basic skill development, but probably not more holistic youth development. When youth are involved as full research partners, they are more likely to have transformative developmental experiences as they are more engaged in defining and coming to

[2] We recognize that youth development is often a *goal* of research, no matter which of these strategies it employs, in that researchers aim to improve practice and thereby improve the developmental effectiveness of schools and programs. What we wish to emphasize here is the developmental nature of the actual *process* of research.

understand research problems, questions and findings, are placed in positions of greater responsibility, and have more participatory interaction with adults.

Expertise/Knowledge

In his discussion of the action research relationship, Rapoport (1985) identifies differences in expertise as one of the "factors making for endemic tensions in the collaboration" (p. 268). That is, researchers and practitioners possess different skills, are experts in different areas, and value different types of knowledge. These variations may become institutionalized in training programs, which establish hierarchies of legitimate or credible knowledge that place scientific, theoretical or academic knowledge above local or practical knowledge. This process is exacerbated in research on youth issues, as young people's knowledge and understandings are often "undervalued" or seen as "invalid" (Hart, 1992). This sentiment seems to be gaining more mainstream appeal, as evidenced by Lerner, Fisher and Weinberg's (2000) discussion of the need to expand our ideas of what constitutes knowledge. They argue that scientific knowledge, historically the source of "basic knowledge," must be supplemented by community understandings of the relational interplay between knowledge and local context. Moreover, they maintain that knowledge is not just defined by "scientist-derived data," concluding that, "a learning collaboration between scholars and community members must become a part of the knowledge generation process" (p. 13). (See also Greeno et al., 1999, and Zeldin, 2000, for related discussions).

We include conceptions of expertise and knowledge as the third dimension in our framework for understanding research with youth (see Figure 1). In the first two research strategies, "youth as subjects" and "youth as informants," expertise resides within adult researchers. While they may focus their efforts on gaining information from youth or eliciting youth voice, adult researchers maintain the locus of control, determining what is important (e.g. by choosing research questions and designing survey instruments or interview protocols) and using data from youth to create knowledge. In addition, the primary aim of knowledge creation is often theoretical, intending to make a contribution to the scientific field, rather than practical.

In the third research strategy, working with "youth as research assistants," expertise and knowledge is more mixed, but leans in the direction of adult researchers. Adults are still experts on what matters in terms of the research frame and questions; however youth are seen as expert

data collectors, knowing what contexts matter and how best to uncover information. While engaged in the data collection process in this way, youth researchers may or may not be seen as knowledge creators.

In the "youth as research partners" strategy, expertise and knowledge is rooted primarily in local young people and their communities. Youth are now seen as experts in determining what questions are important, as well as the appropriate data collection strategies. That is, they are seen to have fuller contextual expertise. As analysts of data, young people become generators of new knowledge. In addition, the rationale for the research is determined in collaboration with youth. As a result, research will typically lead to the creation of practical knowledge, meeting needs which are valued by youth themselves.

Ownership

We define "ownership" as the feeling that people get when they care about an activity, when they take responsibility for the outcome and they are engaged in it. This concept is important to our framework, because it helps to distinguish conventional research from newer models of participatory action research with youth. In research traditions where youth are subjects of research (or informants), ownership is situated primarily in research institutions. The youth themselves often have limited knowledge of the purpose of the research project, and thus have little incentive to care deeply about its results (even if the results may have long-term consequences that are quite relevant to their lives). In contrast, in research projects that collaborate with youth, shared ownership is a key goal, especially if the research partnership aims to benefit from the local expertise and unique insights of youth. Only then will the research questions and design authentically reflect a youth perspective.

Community Youth Mapping (Academy for Educational Development, 2001) is one example of a research endeavor in which youth ownership is promoted. Youth mapping is a strategy that enables young people to work together and with adults to document the places and resources available to them and their families. Goals and strategies are developed locally, depending on the needs and priorities of the community. Examples of participatory action research, such as that discussed by Meucci and Schwab (1997), also seek to share ownership with youth by collaborating on research design and implementation. Both of these are examples

in which youth are not merely research assistants trained to collect data, but instead share responsibility for the direction and purpose of the project.

The degree to which authentically shared ownership is achieved depends on the relationship between youth and adult researchers. Attempts to share ownership with "youth as research assistants" are inevitably one-sided, because the youth themselves do not design the project. They may carry out research activities, such as interviews or observations, but without being involved in research design they may not care deeply about or understand the broader goals. In contrast, when working with "youth as research partners," ownership is more likely to be fully shared because the research design itself becomes a collaborative endeavor.

Audience

The audience for research is another dimension of our framework that distinguishes research strategies from one another, and it follows logically from distinctions about ownership. Traditionally, the audience for research on youth issues is found in the academic and policy-making communities. Some aspects of this research may focus on advancing theory and others on implications for practice. In either case, the readers of research reports are likely to be highly trained professionals who are familiar with the vocabulary and techniques of scholarly reporting. It is much less common for the audience of youth research to be youth themselves, or residents of the communities where they live. This, too, would be a point that distinguishes working with "youth as research partners" from the other three research strategies. Although "youth as research assistants" may be more likely to have mixed audiences—including community members and university researchers—it is still motivated by the leadership and goals of adult researchers. By contrast, the goal for "youth as research partners" is more likely to reach a primarily local audience, comprised of youth, parents, youth workers, and teachers.

To cite one example of local audience, we can draw on a case that occurred at one of the youth center evaluation sites prior to our arrival. As part of a social action curriculum, a group of students were asked to determine an issue that was important to them that they would like to change in their community. After lengthy discussion, the group chose sexual harassment among students as a problem in their schools. With the assistance of an adult facilitator, the students began a year-long project involving interviews with administrators, surveys of students, and research on school district policy. The group succeeded in persuading the school board to revise

its policies and procedures regarding sexual harassment. The results of their research were communicated to students in workshops at schools across the district and through a handbook given out to all students. In sum, the findings, which were substantial, were channeled back to the constituency that was most affected by the problem. Although there was most likely theoretical significance to the research as well, what was most important to the youth activists was to make sure they reached the audience that would be most impacted by the study.

Ecological Validity

Researchers of youth development have grown increasingly critical of methods and experiments that are isolated from the natural contexts in which youth lead their lives (Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000; Zeldin, 2000). Many well-designed laboratory experiments and survey instruments are criticized for lacking "ecological validity," which refers to the extent to which research maintains the integrity of the real life situations it is designed to investigate (Cole, 1996). Do the environments in which the research takes place, and the variables in question, represent the everyday lived experience of people being studied—"the actual ecology of human development (p. 14, Lerner et al, 2000)?" Ethnography is one answer to this criticism; it represents an effort to understand the local realities and culturally specific meanings that contextualize youth's experiences (Burton, Obedeillah, & Allison, 1996).

Unlike ownership or audience, ecological validity is not a dimension that necessarily differentiates the four research strategies. After all, skilled adult ethnographers can successfully gain insider knowledge through spending enough time in a particular setting (Johnson, 1997). Even surveys and experimental tasks have the potential to reflect the lived experience of research subjects (Cole, 1996). Nevertheless, collaborating with youth to conduct research has the potential to increase ecological validity in ways that adults may be unable to do alone. In work with "youth as research assistants," youth can reach peers who are not readily accessible through familiar channels such as the school or youth center. Also, youth ethnographers may have an easier time than adults seamlessly integrating themselves into an activity for observation. In work with "youth as research partners," the research questions themselves are likely to reflect a true problem or puzzle in the community being studied, as reflected in the sexual harassment example above. In sum, collaborating with youth, who are residents of the communities being studied, can be a significant help to efforts to strengthen ecological validity. This will become

even clearer in our discussion of the Youth Ethnographer Project, which we critically examine using our framework for understanding research with youth.

The Youth Ethnographers Project: A case study in working with youth to conduct research

The Youth Ethnographers Project is part of a larger qualitative evaluation of five after school youth centers in a major west coast city. This evaluation, called the Youth Voices Study, examines *how* and *why* the youth centers influence young people in the ways they do. The study is guided by five questions:

1) How do youth experience the center as a place to be?
2) How do youth value their participation in the center, and what difference do they perceive it makes in their lives?
3) How do youth assess the program activities available to them, and why are certain activities valued more than others?
4) What factors beyond the center—in school, family, and neighborhood—support or constrain their participation and its benefits?
5) How do participants' experiences and perceptions change over time?

During the first six months of the evaluation adult researchers relied on focus groups, case study interviews, and informal observations to answer these questions. In the ninth month we added the Youth Ethnographers aspect of the evaluation. Earlier work with junior ethnographers conducted by McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman (1994) had proven to be successful and motivated the development of a similar youth researcher team for this study. We hoped that by training youth as researchers, they would be able to collect data and perspectives that would otherwise have been unavailable to us. Also, we felt that partnering with youth was consistent with the objectives of our study, which foregrounds youth voice. We anticipated that in working with youth we would get corrective feedback about our research direction: are we looking in the right places? Are we asking the right questions?

In this next section we discuss the implementation of the Youth Ethnographers Project (YEP) using the framework developed in the previous section as a lens (see Figure 1). We highlight those features of the project that were most successful and also those that were most challenging. We conclude by identifying lessons we have drawn about the promise of future efforts to conduct collaborative research with youth.

An overview of the project

Recruitment & training: Youth Ethnographers were recruited from the after school youth centers that are part of the evaluation and the schools where the centers are located. We advertised the project as an opportunity to be part of our study of the youth centers. A stipend of $100/month was offered, both as an incentive for youth to participate and also to recognize that their work would be taken seriously. Methods of selection differed at each site: at one site, where many youth were interested, interviews were used to select youth; at the other sites we were able to work with all the students who expressed interest. A total of twenty-one youth were selected to work at five different sites.

The project started with a mandatory all-day training. The training was meant to 1) introduce the youth to the research goals of the Youth Voices Study, 2) introduce them to each other and us, and 3) teach them interviewing and observation skills that they would use in their work. The research workshops emphasized a range of skills, both conceptual and technical. For example, while we wanted to be sure that youth could draw a conceptual distinction between "description" and "interpretation"—i.e., "the room had a mural on the wall showing kids playing" vs. "the room was pretty"—we also wanted to make sure that youth felt comfortable with basic procedures, such as asking permission to record an interview and operating a tape recorder. For these reasons, the training emphasized hands-on practice in conjunction with reflection and discussion.

The group itself was comprised of youth from most of the neighborhoods in the city, ranging from middle class to working class and distressed neighborhoods. The group also represented a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds[3]. There was quite an age range as well—some sites had teams of just 7th and 8th graders, others had high school seniors. Overall, there were 13 middle school students, 7 high school students, and one college freshman (who also worked as a mentor at one of the youth centers and lived in the neighborhood where it was located). This age diversity is partly explained by the fact that the youth centers are located in elementary, middle, and high schools—although there are exceptions, youth center participants typically reflect the grade level of the schools that house the centers.

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[3] The majority of participants (14) were Asian-American (including Chinese-, Filipino-, Indian-, and Korean-American), which partly reflects the heavy participation from the two centers located in Asian-American neighborhoods. The remainder of the group was made up of African-American (5), Latino (1) and European-American (1) youth.

Methodology and research questions: Although we wanted to include the youth ethnographers in shaping research questions, we were constrained by the fact that there were pre-existing questions guiding the Youth Voices Study. In particular, YEP was meant to address our fourth question, which focuses on the role of neighborhood and school contexts in the lives of youth center participants. In order to provide structure to their study, we chose to break the research into three general topics, which could then be deviated from or modified as time went on. These initial topics were: "Youth center," "school," and "neighborhood". Ethnographers were instructed to use interviews and observations to learn about these places. Within this structure, youth were responsible for designing their own interview protocol questions (done in groups, site by site), finding informants to interview, and selecting settings for observations. So, for example, in an observation the ethnographer might choose a park, or a corner, or some location where she could make an observation about youth's experience in the neighborhood. For an interview, she might seek out a friend to interview, using the protocol developed by the group. Both observations and interviews were meant to include not just the description (or recording) of what happened, but also some form of reflection or interpretation of what happened. So, at the end of a set of field notes (usually 1-2 paragraphs long), or interview, the youth ethnographer was expected to write (or tape record) a short reflection on what was interesting about the information, or what we could learn from it.

Program structure: Each Youth Ethnographer was responsible for two interviews and two observations every two weeks. Ethnographers met with their YEP coordinator at bi-weekly meetings, at which they would receive feedback on field notes, discuss what they had learned in the past two weeks, and formulate next steps for the research. (Each site's YEP coordinator provided ongoing feedback and guidance; coordinators were drawn from the team of adult researchers working on the Youth Voices Study). We deliberately left the long-term direction of the research project open in order to allow for flexibility in responding to the interests and questions of the youth at each site, and to the local neighborhood and school contexts. For this reason, different sites worked fairly autonomously, and emphasized different features of the three questions. For example, one site focused almost entirely on understanding opportunities for

youth in the neighborhood, whereas others focused on youth's experiences in school, or the reasons why some youth did not spend time at the youth center.

The project as a whole spanned five months (November to March). After spending roughly three months on data collection (excluding breaks for winter holidays), each group concluded the project by analyzing the data they had collected. They read through the transcripts and field notes and worked to cull themes from the data. Site coordinators wrote memos summarizing the main conclusions drawn by the team of youth ethnographers. After the memo was written, youth ethnographers were expected to read and respond to it. If the memo met their satisfaction, by expressing their findings accurately, they would give it their approval.

Assessing the project using our conceptual framework

Because our intention is to reflect on the promise and challenge of research partnerships with youth in general, we focus more on evaluating our process with YEP than we do the findings of the Youth Ethnographers, which are still in a preliminary stage. Our framework provides a useful lens for analyzing those features of our design that helped make our project a success, and also those that set us up for challenges. In reflecting on our study we have come to the conclusion that, while certain features of our study qualify it to be called "Youth as Partners," on the whole it is more accurately described as "Youth as Research Assistants" (see Figure 1 column headers). This categorization will become clearer as we examine YEP in light of each dimension of our framework.

Youth-Adult Relationship: The relationship between youth and adults in YEP was distinct from youth-adult relationships in other aspects of the Youth Voices Study, where youth are typically "informants" in interviews and focus groups. In YEP we collaborated with youth in the process of doing research, by asking them not just to carry out interviews, but to develop protocols and give feedback about the study. Here are some of the ways they describe the project in their final evaluations (written):

How would you describe this project to someone who didn't know about it?

> (It is) a research project conducted by Stanford students that work together with students from various middle and high schools to gather information on a community center.

> This program is here to listen to youth and their thoughts. We collect information for a better understanding of youth and neighborhood, and youth center.

These excerpts reflect the level of involvement with which the youth ethnographers worked on the project. Yet it is important also to draw the distinction that, despite our wish to organize this project around the notion that youth were "partners" with us, they are more accurately described as "quasi-partners." We draw this distinction because of the genesis of the project: we approached youth seeking their help in answering some of our guiding research questions, rather than shaping the questions together from the start. Furthermore, the provision of a stipend, which was dispensed by the YEP coordinators, meant that several youth viewed the project as a job. For example, in his evaluation, one ethnographer wrote, "I think I did take this project very seriously because it was like a real job." Another wrote, "I enjoyed...bragging about having a job." While the fact of having a job itself did not preclude a sense of "partnership," it added an employer-employee dimension that reinforced the message that the youth were research assistants in a larger study.

Youth Development: Our framework distinguishes between "basic skills" and "holistic youth development" in order to differentiate research partnerships with youth. Whereas working with youth as research assistants is more likely to educate youth in basic research skills, we argue that working with youth as research partners will provide basic skills *and* empowering developmental experiences such as leadership, shared decision-making, and meaningful relationships with adults.

For the most part, this line of reasoning was borne out by the coordinators' observations of the Youth Ethnographers work and the youth's feedback about their experiences. For example, several of the coordinators reflected that the youth showed improvement in their skills as interviewers and observers. When we checked in at the mid-point of the project, youth reported learning several basic research skills: "interviewing," "asking follow-up questions," "using a tape recorder." One Y.E. was especially proud that he came to understand the distinction between description and interpretation. The coordinators did not get a strong impression of more personal or transformative developmental changes.

However, we also noticed that the line between skills and development is quite blurry. For example, in their final evaluation of the project, Youth Ethnographers had a range of

responses to the questions, "What have you gotten out of this experience? What will you take with you?" Some focused on basic skills, as we might have expected:

> The thing I will take with me is learning how to use a tape recorder.
>
> I learned mainly to gather information and present it in a professional manner. Also I learned how to cash a check in a bank.
>
> (Something) I will take is the interviewing.

Others focused on the content of their research when describing what they would take away from the experience:

> The fact that the Youth Center isn't a cheap scam acting like it's helping kids but really getting money for just sitting around.
>
> I got to learn what people thought about things about school and their neighborhood.

And still others described what they would take in a more personal way:

> Motivates me to work with youth as a career choice. Reassures my feelings that youth need people to listen to them.
>
> I have gotten a lot of help out of this because now I know what to be after college, a researcher.

Interpreting this range in responses is confounded by the significant age differences of participants (from 7th grade to college first year). Nevertheless, the diversity of responses reflects how permeable these categories are, and also how different individuals draw different lessons from the same general experience.

Knowledge/Expertise: Whose knowledge counts? Who is the expert? Our intention in this project was to act according to the premise that the youth ethnographers were the experts about the environments where they spend their time. We reasoned that they would have insights and ideas that would not occur to us as outside researchers. To ensure that their knowledge and expertise was utilized, we asked the youth to design their interview questions, choose the location of their observations, and help us analyze their data. For example, in our first training, youth ethnographers were asked to brainstorm questions that would help us to understand the

experience of youth in their neighborhoods. Here is an example of some of the questions they wanted to ask in interviews:

- Do you feel safe in your neighborhood? Why? Why not?
- What kinds of things do you do in your neighborhood?
- What are some things that you wish your neighborhood had?
- What kinds of people are in your neighborhood? (ethnicity)
- Do you have friends in your neighborhood?

In a concrete sense, then, YEP valued the youth researchers as experts about their peers and local communities. We reasoned that, even if they were inexperienced with designing questions, they would be savvy about the right kinds of questions to ask.

Additionally, we tried not to have too many preconceived notions of what would count as valid research topics, in order to give Youth Ethnographers room to be creative. We wanted to see where they would lead us and tried to foster this as much as possible. For example, while getting a ride home from a meeting, one youth ethnographer started pointing out aspects of her neighborhood and how it is changing through gentrification. This issue had not come up in any of her previous reflections or observations because she had not thought it fit to be included in the study. We encouraged her to pursue this line of research, and it resulted in some interesting observations about the changing face of the neighborhood and what it means for youth.

> Description: Seville St. is busy. Restaurants are getting busier; kids are on their way home from school…There aren't a lot of things on this street that are catered toward young children; there are only restaurants, bookstores, and coffee shops. But none of those really look like they are catered for young kids.
>
> Reflection: This observation was supposed to be on how Seville Street affected the young children and teenagers living in the neighborhood. But I don't think that it has much of an effect on the younger age group. It caters mostly towards people who are in their mid 20's to late 30's…If you observe the neighborhood and see all the kids walking around, someone would think that they have at least something to do on this part of Seville street for kids, but unfortunately they don't.

Despite these examples of ways in which youth ethnographers shaped their particular lines of research, it is important to remember that the central research questions preceded the project. And in this sense, our efforts to empower local knowledge and expertise were in tension with issues of ownership.

Ownership: YEP is an example of a project in which we tried to share ownership with the youth, but we did not reach a point where ownership was fully shared. In our own internal evaluations of the project, several YEP coordinators felt that lack of ownership by youth was a weakness of the project. For example, at one site, the YEP coordinator noticed that the ethnographers consistently phrased discussions using the pronoun "you" instead of "we".

> I don't think that they felt a strong connection to the research questions, or strong ownership of the project. It was more about "what do *you* want to know, what do *you* want to find out?" instead of, "*we* should ask this, or *we* should try to find out that."

Another of the coordinators reflected:

> Not sure how much the YE's felt that they determined the (research) questions, and so I'm not sure if they were really interested in the answers they were getting in the interviews.

While some of the supervisors were frustrated by this feature of the project, it is important to point out that on the whole the level of engagement and participation was quite high. Seventeen of the 21 youth completed the entire 5 month project , which we believe is a healthy participation rate considering the multiple activities that occupied the Youth Ethnographers' time. Furthermore, some of the coordinators reported that as time went on the youth ethnographers increased their level of commitment and engagement. This increase may have been related to the process of analyzing data, which occurred towards the end of the project and which helped the youth to gain a more comprehensive picture of their work.

Ecological Validity: One of the strengths of this project was its sensitivity to the natural ecology in which youth move through their lives. The advantages of working with youth ethnographers was especially clear in their research pertaining to the neighborhood contexts outside of school and youth center, because we—the university researchers—were so unfamiliar with these settings. On several occasions youth chose to observe places that would not have occurred to the adults on the Youth Voices team. For example, one youth chose to observe the field outside of her school where kids hang out in non-school time, where they smoke and "let loose", i.e., use language and have conversations they could not have in front of adults. The youth underlined the importance of this space, by describing it as one where youth talk about their interests and worries about life.

Another example came up when one of the youth ethnographers, after being asked to observe after school opportunities for youth in the neighborhood, chose to observe activities at a local deli, where kids like to hang out, get some food, and enjoy freedom from supervision:

> Description: I'm at the deli right now I'm seeing kids talking. Doing homework, eating, hangout, about 30 kids are there right now...I'm looking around and I'm seeing lots of little pictures around the place...of the kids that go and hang out. (Pictures taken when they were little)....This is mostly like a hangout place (everybody knows everybody). The interesting thing is all different kinds of kids go here from all different kinds of schools.
>
> Interpretation: It's good because youth can go over there and hang out instead of going home. It's not much like (the youth center), this place is more having fun than learning activities or getting help.

By virtue of their familiarity with the routines and popular places in youth's lives, the youth ethnographers provide windows that are otherwise unavailable to us adult researchers. While it is true that we could go to the deli to observe, it would not have occurred to us to do so. Furthermore, we might have wanted to observe the youth hanging out after school at the field smoking, but we would have undoubtedly altered the situation through our presence.

In addition to access to physical spaces, the youth ethnographers gave us access to information that might otherwise have been kept private. At one of the sites, the YEP coordinator, who had been conducting focus groups and interviews there for almost a year, learned new things about the neighborhood that she had been unaware of:

> I learned that there's a lot of racial tension in the neighborhood that hadn't really come out before—although now I've talked about it with my case study kids, and they have lots to say. So maybe it pointed me in a direction that I should follow up in my own research?

These reflections point to another feature of validity that was important to the overall evaluation. In addition to the surprises that might come up, interviews and observations conducted by youth helped to "triangulate" our own conclusions drawn from focus groups and case studies (Johnson, 1997). For example, a major theme that arose from our first six months of work had to do with certain youth centers as "safe places." The youth ethnographers' work provided a check against this finding, to see if in fact kids did use these same descriptors when talking about the youth centers with their peers (which many did).

Conclusion: Lessons Learned for Research Partnerships with Youth

In summary, the Youth Ethnographers Project provides evidence of a variety of benefits that arise from doing research with youth. First, there were tangible benefits that accrued to the Youth Ethnographers themselves. They learned new research skills, earned a stipend (for many of them this was their first experience receiving a paycheck), and met new people. The project also had a positive impact on our relations with youth center adult staff. One coordinator wrote, "The staff seemed to really warm up to me and feel like I was doing something worthwhile since I was actually working with the youth." Most importantly, YEP helped the Youth Voices Study to gather data that it otherwise would not have had access to. Youth helped us to gain valuable access to the multiple contexts—including school, neighborhood, and youth center— through which young people move.

At the same time, certain challenges came up during the course of the project that were cause for reflection. For example, early in the implementation of the project one coordinator noticed a tension in our priorities: Is the project meant to be a developmental experience for the youth or a data collection method for us? We started the project hoping to do achieve both goals, but noticed that often we were not able to provide the support necessary for it to be a truly educative experience for the youth. Another coordinator noticed a second tension arising from the level at which the youth were involved: how can we motivate the Youth Ethnographers to think in a critical and engaged manner about the study's research questions if these questions are not ones that they designed or find very engaging?

Not all research projects with youth need to aspire to the full partnership variety. After all, our project, which we describe as a "quasi-partnership," was successful in meeting limited goals related to data collection for a larger evaluation and providing new learning opportunities for the youth. However, we have come to conclude that the full potential of working with youth as researchers is most likely to be realized in a model that embraces them as partners throughout the research process. This requires a combination of sharing ownership of the project with the youth and supporting youth leadership in the project. To do this, we suggest the following five overlapping strategies:

- *Design project to be developmentally-appropriate for youth:* Implementing a project and training groups of youth ranging from 7th to 13th grade is a challenging task. For example,

12th graders tend to thrive on levels of autonomy and independence that leave 7th graders struggling. Therefore, it would have been easier to structure the project if all of the researchers had been roughly the same age. More important, however, than working with a more uniform group of youth is accommodating the developmental needs of those with whom you are working. Middle school students were capable of doing good research; they just required more training, structure, and support from the coordinators. Because of our own balancing act across a wide age range, sometimes the younger ethnographers were left to fend for themselves, and at other times the older ethnographers may have felt under-challenged. One strategy that we were not able to implement, but which we recommend, is to create opportunities for older students to facilitate meetings and mentor younger students. Such a strategy, reflecting Hart's "ladder of young people's participation" (1992), would allow youth to choose to participate at different levels, thus addressing challenges that could arise from working with students of different ages.

- *Work with youth at early stage in research question development.* If one's goal is to develop a fully realized action research project with youth, then young people should be involved from the beginning in developing the salient research questions. Although this is not required for all research collaborations with youth, it is central if one seeks to work with youth as "full partners." In addition to working with youth to design research questions, efforts to share ownership should extend to other elements of the process, such as protocol development, research design, data analysis, and summary reports. Shared ownership is a key element of a successful project with youth, and is most likely to lead to inquisitive research.

- *Provide a steady, consistent, program structure.* Efforts to share ownership with youth require a supportive program structure, which we learned the hard way. We tried to run this project with little on-site presence. Coordinators, many of whom lived in different towns from the research sites, saw the ethnographers on average once every two weeks. We were not part of the staff of the youth centers, even though we were ostensibly running a program for the youth. This led to very simple problems that accumulated over time. For example, it was difficult to schedule meetings around the busy schedules of both parties. All of the

youth lived especially busy lives, which included other jobs (some members had two other jobs), youth center activities, schoolwork, and socializing. (In our final evaluation of the project many students identified *lack of time* as the key challenge in their work). Because of the lack of program structure, Youth Ethnographers tended to schedule the meetings around their other, more regularly scheduled activities, which made coordination even harder. Furthermore, if youth had questions about the research, they usually waited until the next meeting with the coordinator to raise them, which could mean a week or two of lost working time. Given these difficulties, a regularly scheduled meeting, with a consistent presence at the site, might have better supported youth participation. This strategy is particularly relevant to the issue of developmental appropriateness. While high school seniors were better able to draw from sporadic meetings and work independently, coordinators of middle school students found that youth's work was significantly better when meetings were regular.

- *Utilize periodic cycles of data collection and analysis.* Proponents of grounded theory recommend ongoing data analysis in order to develop theories and test them as they emerge (Charmaz, 1983). We recommend this strategy for youth researchers because it gives them a more comprehensive view early on of what they are doing. One coordinator reported that her Youth Ethnographers gained new insight into the research through this process:

> They had trouble getting a sense of the bigger picture of their work beyond the individual assignments...But I think their understanding grew over time and now that they have started analysis I really see them starting to make connections and understand the research process.

Earlier data analysis would also have helped youth to take more ownership of the research questions. Another coordinator reported that after completing data analysis at the end of the project several questions and inconsistencies had emerged. For example, interviews with youth revealed that they generally felt like there was nothing in the neighborhood to do after school, that it was boring. Yet observations revealed that there were a number of places in the neighborhood where kids were engaged in activities and having fun. If this incongruity had been noticed earlier, the Youth Ethnographers could have pursued them in subsequent research, and would likely have had a deeper grasp of the purpose because it came from their

own analyses. Instead, the project ended with no opportunity to systematically follow up these questions.

- *Allow time and resources for youth development as well as meeting data collection needs.* Throughout the project there was a shortage of time with the Youth Ethnographers. For example, at a typical meeting the coordinator would have roughly one hour to check in with the Youth Ethnographers. During this time the group would need to discuss research learnings from the past two weeks, exchange feedback on quality of past assignments, discuss upcoming research activities, including developing any protocols that were necessary, give time for skill development, and handle any miscellaneous matters. Not surprisingly, when time was short most coordinators sacrificed ongoing training and skill development for ensuring that data collection continued. In our view, the project suffered because of it. Youth did not have opportunities to refine their research skills, and although their work improved over time, most of this was due to learning by doing rather than focused reflection and training.

This paper began by bringing together literature from three approaches to participatory research - action research, empowerment evaluation, and inquiry-based reform. Despite rich descriptions of these methods in the literature, few researchers have incorporated them into research with youth. But when combined with insights from the youth development field, we can develop a framework for doing research with youth that differentiates four research strategies. Although conventional research that surveys youth and ethnographic research that treats youth as informants both offer specific and beneficial strategies for advancing knowledge about youth's experiences, we argue that youth-adult research collaboration is an under-theorized and under-utilized strategy that deserves more attention in both theory and practice.

One recent effort to develop methods of collaborating with youth is the Youth Ethnographers Project. YEP provides a useful case study for thinking critically about the prospects for research partnerships with youth and to reflect on the assumptions and qualities that distinguish different youth-oriented research strategies from one another. Overall, the Youth Ethnographers Project was a productive attempt to create a research partnership with youth. We used a method with few well-charted antecedents, and through the process learned of the

importance of developing a theoretical understanding of such collaborations in order to achieve maximum benefits for both the research itself and for the youth involved. Such a framework raises important questions for adults who wish to partner with youth in the research process, pointing to possible points of tension and of strength in the collaboration. Research partnerships with youth are a promising endeavor, especially for researchers who are concerned about gaining a context rich understanding of the lives of young people.

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